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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 001922

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SUBJECT: MINISTER OF WOMEN'S AFFAIRS ADVOCATES FOR FULL
MINISTRY STATUS

Classified By: Political Counselor Margaret Scobey for
reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. On June 4, PolCouns met with newly
appointed Minister of State for Women's Affairs Fatin Abd
al-Rahman to congratulate her and re-affirm USG support
for women's rights in Iraq. Abd al-Rahman agreed that
the ministry should focus on programs that unite women
from all backgrounds. She noted that she hoped to
organize training with female lawyers on legislation to
ensure the rights set forth by the Constitution. Abd al-
Rahman confirmed that she would continue to advocate for
her ministry to be elevated to the status of a full
cabinet ministry, and lamented the current lack of staff,
organization and training in the ministry. END SUMMARY.

Freedom of Personal Choice as Focus for Ministry
Programs?

¶2. (C) PolCouns highlighted the importance of women's
rights and USG continuing support for the full
participation of women in a democratic Iraq. Abd al-
Rahman agreed that for democracy to succeed it is
essential that no portion of the population, especially
women, who make up more than half of Iraqis, be excluded
from political, economic or social life. PolCouns noted
USG concern regarding recent reports of women being
forced to wear the hijab. Abd al-Rahman, who herself
wears a hijab, said that such stories were so far only
rumors, but said that she was against such an imposition
and supported women's right to personal choice. PolCouns
suggested that the ministry develop a media program to
bring together women from different backgrounds to talk
about their personal choices. The program would
emphasize that Iraqi women, whether covered or uncovered,
are most powerful when they work together and speak with
one voice - the voice that promotes mutual understanding
and freedom of personal choice. Abd al-Rahman offered
vague agreement that ministry programs should encourage
these principles, without making any commitment.

Constitutional Training for Female Lawyers

¶3. (C) Abd al-Rahman, who is a lawyer by training, said
that the Constitution will guarantee rights for Iraqi
women; however there is still legislation that must be
passed to implement some rights. She hoped to organize
training for female lawyers on the legal rights enshrined
in the Constitution vis-(-vis those that would require
legislation to be enacted. Responding to a question from
PolCouns, Abd al-Rahman noted that laws from the previous

regime requiring women to acquire permission from a male relative to apply for a passport were still in effect. (COMMENT: This requirement did not appear to bother Abd al-Rahman, who shrugged off the issue as status quo rather than as an alarming development - a reaction other Iraqi women have displayed. END COMMENT.)

Full Ministry Status Still on Agenda

14. (C) Abd al-Rahman confirmed that one of her first priorities would be to push for legislation to elevate the status of her ministry to that of a full, cabinet-level ministry. As a Minister of State, she has no authority over the budget or staffing of her ministry. She complained that the ministry had no structure and that her small staff of 17 would never be able to develop Iraq-wide programs. She noted that she was aware of a USG offer to train the staff of the ministry and asked about other USG assistance that may be available.

Comment

15. (C) PolOff was only able to arrange this meeting through the minister's political party, the IIP. Further party contacts explained that all meetings and contact with the minister must be requested through the party two days prior to the intended meeting date, which will significantly change the Embassy's relationship with the ministry compared to the easy, informal relationship we previously enjoyed.

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16. (C) Two of Abd al-Rahman's advisors also attended the meeting, occasionally jumping in to clarify Abd al-Rahman's responses. While she politely agreed with PolCouns comments and suggestions, her responses were decidedly non-committal and it appeared that she had given little thought to the workings of her ministry beyond budget and staffing concerns.

17. (C) On a positive note, a prominent women's rights activist told PolOff in a separate meeting that she had discussed some ideas, including organizing a Constitutional seminar, with Abd al-Rahman (septel). The details of the proposed seminar were very similar to the training sessions Abd al-Rahman described to PolCouns, suggesting that she is open to proposals from and cooperation with NGOs. While tentatively a good sign, we do not yet understand how Abd al-Rahman (or her party) intends to use her office.

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